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### Neil Walker: Hope and Risk: The Two Sides of Both Coins

Posted on September 17 2014

Time is now running out for us all in the referendum debate, so I will keep this as short as I can.

I hold many of the same views as my friends and colleagues Christine Bell and Aileen McHarg, both of whom have just posted on our common SCFF blog site detailed, well-argued and heart-felt cases for preferring the much-discussed uncertainties of 'Yes' to the newly minted uncertainties of the eleventh hour 'Vow' of Better Together. Like them, I wish some version of Devo Max had been on the ballot paper as a third option, and have long regretted that it was not. Like them I am nervous of many features of referendums, though I struggle to see how else we could have come to a decision which – as I trust Friday morning's will be – is accepted by both sides. Like them, I see opportunism in the last minute pledge by the three Unionist party leaders to deliver more and copper-bottomed reform within the Union, though there has already been so much opportunism on both sides at all stages of the campaign, pre and post 'purdah' and postal-vote-casting, that I am not sure that this example should be viewed as particularly culpable. Like them, I wonder how precise the new common commitment of Better Together is, how easy it will be able to make it stick, how quickly it can be delivered, and how adequate it will seem to some supporters of independence. Like them, I recognize that the constitutional politics of the last two years has been transformative, though, as I explain below, I think there are different ways of thinking about preserving and redirecting the 'energy' it contains.

But what else strikes me about their interventions, and also much of the instant reaction to the late moves of Better Together, is how revealing it is of an ironic symmetry in the campaign. For too long, 'No' has criticized 'Yes' for its false optimism, and 'Yes' has responded by criticizing 'No' for its unremitting negativism, its willingness to see only the holes in the 'Yes' case. In this regard, last autumn's White Paper was a key moment. Before it 'Yes' could be condemned for its silences, while after it was condemned for its reckless verbosity. Damned either way – or so 'Yes' bitterly claimed – though Better Together might with some justification hold that silences and careless claims can *both* be culpable.

But now, the shoe – or rather the Doc Marten boot – is very much on the other foot. It is the turn of Better Together to have their proposals smoked out and then stamped upon. That process has in fact been going on for months, ever since the separate proposals of all three Unionist parties were placed on the table earlier in the year, and, in that respect, this week's pledge is less the last-minute reaction than is now being portrayed by some. There is a serious hinterland of analysis and institutional proposal there, and while much work remains to be done to reconcile these different views, for the Yes side to condemn reticence as political bankruptcy or timidity and its opposite as bombast looks uncannily like the kind of tactics they have long (and with some justification) been accusing 'No' of.

My point is a simple but important one. The structure of debate encourages just this symmetry of approach, including symmetry in criticizing the approach of the other side. Granted, the time-lines on either side for their arguments to be put up and knocked down have been quite different, but that too was probably only to be expected, with the early onus to 'put up' naturally falling on those making the case for radical constitutional change (though Better Together was doubtless too comfortable in its "knocking down" role for too long). Yet there is another and deeper aspect to this symmetry, which accounts for the impulse on either side to continue both to put up and to knock down to the very last minute. This has to do with the relationship between hope and risk. Both hope and risk are the product of the deep uncertainty which has pervaded the referendum debate. They are, then, the two sides of the same coin. 'Yes' involves a big gamble, as it cannot guarantee either the economic resources or the legal and institutional forms (common currency, favourable terms of EU membership etc.) of their best version of independence – or so we are regularly told. Yet 'yes' can also make a virtue of this. For where there is risk there is also hope, and a commitment to fill the void of uncertainty with a kind of collective faith and the energy of renewal that brings.

But the same is true of their opponents. The commitment to some kind of quasi-federal constitutional renewal, though slow to take hold, exhibits precisely the same structure of risk and hope. All sorts of things could go wrong. It could, as Christine Bell says, be a 'big mess', and, certainly, involving the other regions of the UK in a way that both speaks to a broad Union-wide commitment to constitutional renewal and recognizes the continuing specificity and intensity of the Scottish desire for self-government is not going to be easy. But again, risk is the mother of a certain kind of hope, and the faith that goes with it. If there is a gradually growing realization across the UK that inclusive constitutional change is necessary to stick together, and if a common floor of social justice is recognized as an indispensable staple of that constitutional change, then the exposure that the recent 'putting up' of the Unionist parties has brought may well be a good and energizing thing in the same way as the go-it-alone commitment of the nationalists can be claimed to have been.

None of this can tell anyone how to vote. It does explain, however, why the 'Yes' side does not have monopoly either of risk or of hope, and why neither side has the right to disdain the hope of the other. For my part, I prefer the hope of Better Together, even if its 'better' expression has come later in the day. That preference is based less on a calculation of costs and benefits, than on what I believe to be the relevant community of hope and risk. Most of us involved the debate and in the vote are culturally Scottish to a significant degree, but, palpably, we are fairly evenly split about whether that implies Scotland or the UK as the relevant community of common political cause. Personally, I still hold the UK to be the relevant community of political cause, the 'people' – Scottish, English, Welsh and Northern Irish – *all* of whom deserve a common chance to resolve their differences and share their resources. That is my main commitment. My secondary commitment is that, whoever wins, the newly generated dividend of political hope, and the energy that accompanies it, not be lost.

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